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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 001582

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [SCUL](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA'S BUDDHIST SUMMIT: WE BUILT IT, NOW FIND  
SOMEONE TO COME

REF: A. RANGOON 1569

[B](#). RANGOON 1378

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: The SPDC carried off its World Buddhist Summit despite the 11th hour loss of the primary sponsor and the 1,600 attendees it was planning to bring. The regime saved face by launching a dual strategy of publicly belittling its departed Japanese co-sponsor while using influential Burmese Buddhists overseas to whip up support and attendees. Though the Summit was not notable for its doctrinal initiatives, it met the regime's more important definition of success -- bolstering the SPDC's notions of its international credibility and role as defender of Theravada Buddhism. End summary.

GOB Pulls Off the Sponsorless Summit

[1](#)2. (U) Despite the October 30th decision by Japan's Nenbutsushu Buddhist sect to pull its sponsorship, the SPDC plowed ahead with its World Buddhist Summit from December 9-11 (ref B). The only concession made to the original sponsors, who bailed following the ouster of former Prime Minister, and Summit champion, General Khin Nyunt, was to drop "The 4th" from the name of the Summit. The Nenbutsushu sect had sponsored three prior World Buddhist Summits in Japan, Thailand, and Cambodia and insisted Rangoon could not host the "4th" such World Summit without it.

[1](#)3. (SBU) According to Burmese state-run media, 1,652 monks from 36 countries attended the 3-day event, held in a man-made "cave" built in 1956 for the 6th Buddhist Synod. However, 1,200 of these monks were Burmese -- either from Burma or flown back from neighboring countries for the event. Despite the negative publicity of Nenbutsushu's pull-out and global calls for boycott, the Thai and Laotian Prime Ministers, and the Cambodian Deputy PM, attended the opening ceremony (ref A). Religious Affairs Ministry representatives or Rangoon-based ambassadors read congratulatory messages from the PMs of Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Nepal, and the Presidents of India and Sri Lanka. (Note: the Sri Lankan PM showed up for an official visit to Burma, but arrived on the day the Summit closed and did not participate. End note.) So-called "arch-monks" from 28 countries also attended the Summit.

Nevermind the Mahayana Sects

[1](#)4. (SBU) Following Nenbutsushu's decision, the SPDC adopted a two-prong strategy in order to save face. First, SPDC media mouthpieces and the Religious Affairs Ministry launched vicious attacks on Nenbutsushu and on Mahayana Buddhism in general (Burmese Buddhism is Theravada). A December 4th article in "The New Light of Myanmar," called the Nenbutsushu sect "third-class" and accused it of trying to establish its headquarters in Japan as "the Vatican" of Buddhism. It downplayed the importance of the sect's financial contributions, claiming the group had committed to pay only 10 percent of the overall expenses -- an unlikely assertion, as Nenbutsushu had planned to pay the airfare and lodging for more than a 1,600 attendees from Japan. A December 11th "editorial" fumed that since, "...hatching evil plots against others is against" Buddhist teachings, Nenbutsushu's attempt to "plot to stop Myanmar from holding the Summit...is a sin."

[1](#)5. (SBU) The Religious Affairs Ministry took the mudslinging a step further, claiming the Mahayana Buddhism practiced by the Nenbutsushu sect is incompatible with the practices of Theravada Buddhism. The Ministry further asserted that Nenbutsushu's decision was for the best, as it was not really appropriate for such a low-ranking Mahayana sect to sponsor a Buddhist Summit inside Burma, the "champion" of Theravada Buddhism.

Round 'Em Up

[1](#)6. (C) Aside from trashing the Summit's erstwhile co-sponsor, the other component of the SPDC strategy involved drafting into service Burmese religious figures of international standing to whip up attendees. According to a GOB source, since early November the Ministry of Religious Affairs along

with a pro-SPDC, fundamentalist Theravada monk and teacher -- known as Saya Thigadu -- have been working with overseas Burmese-born monks and teachers. One in particular, an ethnic Indian Burmese meditation teacher with schools in India, Europe, North America, and Asia, was reportedly critical to drumming up enough support among Burmese and other Theravada Buddhists around the world to bolster attendance numbers. The meditation teacher was rewarded at the Summit with extensive publicity for his schools, and future economic benefits are likely for his son -- a Rangoon businessman.

Comment: Another Feather in the SPDC Cap

17. (SBU) Nothing of major doctrinal significance emerged from the three days, only a blandly worded joint communique that called for further propagation of Buddhist teachings around the world. The real story was the face-saving "success" of the Summit for the SPDC after losing its co-sponsor. Over the past few years, the SPDC has made it a priority to host as many international conferences and Summits as possible; gaining strength and confidence from each one that gets good attendance and uncritical rhetoric. On top of this, the completed Buddhist Summit was successful enough to justify, in their minds, the SPDC leadership's self-appointment as defender of the faith. Meanwhile, the regime's cynical support of Buddhism (rewarding monks for their political support and jailing those who refuse SPDC patronage) and patently "un-Buddhist" behavior continue to make most pious Buddhists here cringe with disgust. End comment.  
MARTINEZ